

## Philosophy in Review



# Patricia Marino, "Philosophy of Sex and Love. An Opinionated Introduction."

Stefano Bigliardi

Volume 41, numéro 4, novembre 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1084779ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1084779ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (imprimé)

1920-8936 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Bigliardi, S. (2021). Compte rendu de [Patricia Marino, "Philosophy of Sex and Love. An Opinionated Introduction."]. *Philosophy in Review*, 41(4), 250–252.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1084779ar>

Copyright © Stefano Bigliardi, 2021



Cet document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

**Patricia Marino.** *Philosophy of Sex and Love. An Opinionated Introduction.* Routledge 2019. 250 pp. \$160.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781138390997); \$42.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781138391000).

Sex and love are central, as well as pervasive, in human life. However, they are also understood and regulated in diverging ways across cultures, as a result of varying traditions, laws, and religious prescriptions. Considering the importance of sex and love in one's existence, the inevitable encounter (and clash) of their discordant conceptualizations in a globalized world, and the fact that those very conceptualizations are often so deeply entrenched to be taken for granted, the relevance of sex and love to philosophy and indeed the *need* to philosophize about them becomes obvious.

Patricia Marino is a philosopher who takes sex and love seriously. Each chapter of her book is dedicated to the analytical discussion of a topical issue: (1) the risk of objectification that is seemingly implied by sexual intercourse, (2) objectification in pornography, (3) the notion of consent and the definition of rape, (4) the commercialization of sex, (5) theories of love as a 'fusion of selves,' (6) theories of love that define it in regard to the lovers' caring attitudes, (7) the possibility of advancing moderate versions of both 'union' and 'concern' theories of love, (8) the concept of sexual orientation, (9) conceptualizations of marriage, (10) racialized preferences in sex and love, (11) sex, love, and disability, (12) the problems related to scientific and medical intervention in sex and love, (13) the tensions between sex- and love-related decision-making, and economics, and (14) the ethics of non-monogamy (i.e., the choice of loving or having sexual intercourse with more than one person at a time).

Operating a selection among the multiple explorations offered by Marino is not easy. In the interest of providing prospective readers with a significant sample of the book's topics, structure, and argumentative style, I will focus here on the first chapter, since it deals with fundamental questions and issues that keep flowing beneath, and resurfacing throughout, the entire discussion.

One may easily agree that evaluating a person only in terms of sex appeal, and seeing them just as a body, is degrading and ultimately dehumanizing. However, sexual attention and intercourse seem to inevitably entail some form or degree of objectification. Marino explores this issue in the light of four theories. Immanuel Kant famously claimed that one should never treat fellow human beings solely as a means, but always at the same time as an end. Sexual appetite, for him, was morally problematic, as it inescapably led to objectifying one's partner. However, he regarded marriage as a solution. The permanent contract that marriage was in his time guaranteed that the partner would not be 'thrown away' after one's animalistic desire was sated, and that husband and wife would commit to each other's wants and needs. Kantian analysis is gender-neutral and mainly focuses on sexual desire as problematic. However, through the lens of theories advanced by contemporary feminist philosophers Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, Marino guides the reader to reflect on the fact that *women* are constantly subject to sexual objectification. In other words, unlike what Kant suggested, objectification is not conveyed by sexual desire in and for itself. It is instead conveyed by widespread, deep-seated (although sometimes unexpressed, or unconscious) structures and conceptualizations that ultimately represent long-term consequences and extensions into modernity

of the ideology that surrounded, supported, and nourished old patriarchal society. Such conceptualization may be ingrained to the point that women themselves may come to regard being objectified as something desirable. Martha Nussbaum, however, elaborates on the possibility of including an element of objectification as part of a loving relationship. Consider a statement such as ‘Wow, you look hot!’: it may simply be a compliment between partners in an equal relationship, or it may be a sign (and means) of objectification between two strangers, even more so if there is a power dynamic and the two parties’ interaction should have no relation whatsoever with sex (as in the case of a job interview). In brief, it is the context, according to Nussbaum, which makes the difference. Provided that the partners respect each other as full humans, Nussbaum suggests, they may objectify each other during sexual intercourse. Nussbaum, however, not unlike MacKinnon and Dworkin, takes issue with pornography, considering that it is invariably one-sided, and it turns its performers into commodities for its consumers. Marino challenges Nussbaum’s views on multiple accounts. She points out that cruelty remains cruelty even when it is mutual; that mutual respect is not invariably entailed by, and therefore doesn’t depend on, intimacy (her example: I may offer hourly wages for someone to work as my pillow, and respect them while they fulfil such function, while not becoming as close with them as lovers do); in fact, explains Marino, intimacy can make things more complex, because a lover may feel compelled to give their consent to their partner’s requests for something they don’t really enjoy.

I have been reading Marino’s monograph as a philosophy instructor interested in imparting undergraduate courses on love and sex at a liberal arts-oriented educational institution located in a non-American/non-Western context. I have therefore tried to assess her work in regard to clarity and originality, while also reflecting on whether it would make for a solid pedagogic support in my current professional context and environment.

The philosophical reflection on sex and love is confronted with multiple challenges. For starters, not all major thinkers, Western and non-Western alike, offered extensive or systematic contributions to it. Sometimes it is difficult to gauge with precision how authors philosophized about sex and love because of how fragmentary or unsystematic their suggestions are. Even those who did write extensively and systematically in this regard, developed their theories by creatively elaborating upon, or challenging, conceptions of sex and love ingrained in their respective cultures that are in their turn difficult to reconstruct. As a result, such conceptions, which one may be tempted to use as a platform for the discussion of current issues, are often only of historical interest. A philosophy teacher, interested in offering an overview and discussion of the philosophies of sex and love elaborated by great authors of the past, will *not* find Marino’s book a suitable resource. However, I am making this observation in a spirit of appreciation. Marino’s choice to focus on *contemporary* thinkers and theories, and therefore to vigorously re-orient the discussion, should be taken as an important suggestion conveyed by this book although the author does not make it explicit. While it is intellectually stimulating and fascinating to explore, say, Plato’s subtle and labyrinthine *Symposium*, or try to piece together a consistent conception of sex and love from the multiple poetic suggestions scattered in Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*, one should not forget that sex and love *currently and urgently* pose philosophical challenges characterized by highly specific traits and dynamics

(consider, for instance, the unprecedented diffusion and growth of pornography). While by no means do I intend to deny the importance and intrigue of the philosophy of sex and love historically considered, I think that Marino makes an important point, by limiting historical references (as in the aforementioned case of Kant, that is more of an exception) so as to shift the focus onto contemporary authors, topics, and problems that she explores without taking detours.

As trivial as this observation may sound, considering the complexity and diversity of today's academic world, one cannot exclude that some of Marino's readers, including instructors, may find some of her assumptions problematic (for instance, those regarding same sex and queer relationships), or feel that her focus on North America and on English-language debate is a limitation. However, it is also the case that Marino is completely loyal and transparent to her readers. In addition to presenting the book as an *opinionated* one from its very subtitle, Marino makes her ethical and cultural presuppositions explicit in the introduction. For this reason, even a disagreeing reader may still find the book useful.

Another feature makes Marino's monograph a valuable resource for teachers. Throughout each chapter, the reader is exposed to a careful explanation of the philosophical problem at stake, followed by a review of the solutions offered by different thinkers, and concluded by Marino's own critical assessment that can include raising further challenges or delineating an alternative theory. To be sure, the chapters are strongly related to each other (it is particularly the case of 5, 6, and 7). In principle, however, each one can be fruitfully read as a standalone piece. In other words, an instructor interested in including Marino's book in their course may assign it in its entirety, but will also find that single chapters can easily be used to introduce and frame specific topics.

If read in its entirety, however, Marino's *Philosophy of Sex and Love* will leave the reader with the feeling that they not only have an overview of their multiple facets and challenges of sex and love, philosophically considered, in contemporary times, but also, and most importantly, that they can grasp the deep *interconnectedness* of such facets and challenges, that Marino masterfully conveys.

**Stefano Bigliardi**, Al Akhawayn University